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## POLITICS & INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The question of African agency in international relations

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**Abstract:** The subject of agency in Africa's international relations (IR) is often shrouded in generalised accounts of Africa as a supplicant actor. Utilising examples from a variety of African states, this article makes the argument that African actors are able to exert assertive agency in their various encounters with external partners although the level of agency they are able to exert is determined by a variety of factors including; the type of governmental regime in place, possession and control of strategic commodities by the regime in place and the willingness of the governmental regime to work with civil society in its engagements with external partners. In the final analysis, African agency should not be solely seen as emanating from and being exerted by governmental elites, but should also be examined as coming from independent civil society movements as well as exceptional and ordinary African individuals. Thus, African agency is multifaceted and multi-actor in nature.

**Subjects:** African Studies; International Politics; International Relations

**Keywords:** Africa; agency; state; civil society; individuals

### 1. Introduction

Africa's history is one of exploitation and marginalisation.<sup>1</sup> This history, marked by the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the continent's colonisation by European powers and, thereafter, episodes of post-colonial inter-state and intra-state armed conflicts, as well as, hunger and disease, points to the roots of the continent's marginality in IR and consequently, that of its study, IR. As a result of

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### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

African agency in international relations (IR) is conceptualised as African actors' ability to negotiate and bargain with external actors in a manner that benefits Africans themselves. African agency can be further taken to incorporate African initiatives taken by Africans to improve their socio-economic well-being as well as in projecting a posture of power and self-help in international engagements. In short, it is self-reflective and self-benefitting social action. What should be understood is that African agency is not exerted purely by states. In fact, the most effective form of agency is a multi-faceted kind that incorporates state and non-state actors. This means the African state must create room to work with civil society, individuals and private sector, among other actors if benefits are to accrue from their engagements with different partners.

this history sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries have been on the margins of the international system for many years (Engel & Olsen, 2005). Concomitantly some analyses of Africa continues to depict the continent as largely peripheral to the main forces of change in global politics, a situation that has reinforced the idea of Africa's global marginality and lack of agency<sup>2</sup> (Brown, 2006; Cornelissen, Cheru, & Shaw, 2012).

The result of Africa's marginality has been a lack of theoretical interest in Africa's IR (Engel & Olsen, 2005). The IR literature on Africa is quite sparse and much of what does exist is on the continent's role in North-South relations, and here the emphasis is on the North (Brookes, 2007; Zartman, 2008). Added to this, Africa's intellectual exclusion from the IR mainstream debates has meant that little of the literature on African IR has had any explicit theoretical content (Croft, 1997). To this end, Africa has been taken as a passive actor even in some of the important events that are shaping the twenty-first century (Sidiropoulos, 2009). Supporting the above-mentioned views is the position taken by some of the most important thinkers in IR.

Hans Morgenthau, a prominent classical realist whose work and theoretical approach dominated the study of IR up to the 1970s, mentions that Africa did not have a history before the First World War and hence "it was a politically empty space" (Morgenthau, 1985, p. 369). Kenneth Waltz, the father of political structuralism, in a reference equally applicable to Africa, states that, "...it would be ridiculous to construct a theory on international politics based on Malaysia and Costa Rica..." (Waltz, 1979, p. 72). From this standpoint, great powers are the only states capable of influencing international politics or IR literature, and hence African issues and those of the developing world are largely inconsequential in IR.

Additionally, while economic structuralist approaches such as Dependency, Marxist and World Systems theories seem to (re)focus attention on Africa exposing the exploitative nature of global economic relations, they do however view the continent structurally as part of the global periphery, an agency-less victim of great power/core manipulations (Chen, 2010; Dos Santos, 1970; Wallerstein, 1976). Africa hence exists only to the extent that it is acted upon (Dunn, 2001). Similarly, Africa has also been marginalised in media reportage over the years. Indeed, concern has been raised of the overly pessimistic picture presented by Western media coverage (which dominates world media output) about Africa. Daniel Mezzana expresses concern that:

...the standard stereotypes indubitably portray the continent (of) Africa as a place of major natural catastrophes (floods, volcanic eruptions, droughts etc.) and brutal and violent social conflicts....and as far as mentality is concerned the classic and well known recurring stereotypes of Africans represents them as constantly and inevitably primitive, irrational, superstitious, lazy as well as incapable to plan and care for themselves....and (therefore) dependent on outside help for any emergency

In the same logic Mo Ibrahim laments that, "All we hear about Africa in the west is Darfur, Zimbabwe, Congo, Somalia, as if that is all there is. Yet there are 53 countries in Africa, and many of them are doing well" (Bedell, 2009). Africa is apparently only useful for generating sensationalised reports of human suffering, not for contributing to any serious discussion of world politics (Dunn, 2001). But for Phillip Gourevitch there is a stubborn misconception that dominates Western thinking towards Africa that, "Africans generate human catastrophes but don't really make meaningful politics" (Gourevitch, 1998, p. 326).

This general depiction of Africa as poor, powerless and unimportant, over the past 30 years, coincided with the constraining of the region's room for manoeuvre against International Financial Institutions (IFIs) such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (Dunn, 2001, p. 51).<sup>3</sup> Operating under a neo-liberal framework, the two institutions have played such critical roles in the provision of development finance, something which has meant that a number of African states lost their sovereign decision-making in a number of domestic policy fields. However,

it is not only the IMF and World Bank that exerted strong influence over the course of economic development on the continent but the situation was compounded by bilateral donor governments who also interfered in domestic African politics, a development seen by Dunn as increasing the “re-colonisation” of many African states after the Cold War (Dunn, 2001, p. 51).

Literature suggesting Africa as a “dark continent” and “hopeless continent”, a region whose capacity lies not in generating forces of economic and political development, but in breeding global catastrophes, dominated most of the narratives in the 1990s (Africa: The Heart of the Matter, 2000a; Anderson, 1997; Michaels, 1993; Minney, 1996; Morrow, 1992). Indeed the 1990s were taken as a “lost decade”<sup>4</sup> for Africa and the incidence of poverty, war and disease made the continent a “scar on the world’s conscience”.<sup>5</sup> The strategic relevance of Africa was at an all-time low in the decade to the extent that “African states were transformed from Cold War pawns into irrelevant international clutter” (Decalo, 1998, p. 441).

## 2. Traditional IR theories’ shortcomings

The African continent was therefore typically ignored in mainstream IR studies and “phrases such as ‘off the radar’, ‘Afro-pessimism’ and ‘collapsed states’ came to depict the relationship of the African continent to international relations” (Nkiwane, 2001, p. 280). This connects with Alfred Sauvy’s statement that, “the Third World is nothing” and it “wants to be something” but would remain nothing as a result of exploitation. Additionally, the globe is laden with hierarchies and values; in this hierarchy of values, mainstream IR scholars have tended to place the study and utility of Africa as a region at the periphery. In short, the canon of IR has been consistent in its dismissal of Africa (Nkiwane, 2001). For Croft (1997) the key debates in IR (i.e. on military security and international political economy) especially covered by neorealism and liberalism, have not been areas in which Africa has been seen to play a role.

The dismissal of Southern states in general and African states in particular as weak is a reflection of scholarship whose intent is to “privilege the experiences, interests, and contemporary dilemmas of a certain portion of the society of states at the expense of the experiences, interests and contemporary dilemmas of the large majority of states” (Ayoob, 2002, p. 29). In fact, the major theories of IR fail to pass the basic test of adequacy primarily because they do not concern themselves with the behaviour of the majority members of the international system, and consequently fail to provide adequate explanations for the causes of most manifestations of conflict and disorder in the system (Ayoob, 2002).

The solution, according to Ayoob (2002) is to develop IR theories that take into consideration the peculiar reality of developing states. Ayoob’s theory of Subaltern realism is intended to plug this gap. Subaltern realism was coined to denote the experience of the Subalterns (weak states) in the international system that is largely ignored by the elitist historiography as popularised by both neorealism and neoliberalism. This stems from these theories’ concentration on the dynamics of interaction among the great powers and the industrialised states of the global North (Ayoob, 2002). Thus, both neorealism and neoliberalism share a neo-colonial epistemology that privileges the global North over the global South, the powerful minority over the weak but numerous majority (Ayoob, 2002).

Africa’s continued marginalisation in IR literature was also evidenced in Europe, where the Marxists and others fought to be heard in the IR debate, but not by looking at Africa. The post-positivists, post-modernists, social constructivists and critical theorists attacked realism/neorealism as a hegemonic discourse. The introduction of post-positivism brought about Yosef Lapid’s definition of IR’s third great debate (positivism versus post-positivism), but again did not allow for any concentration on Africa (Croft, 1997). This position was supported by Nkiwane (2001) when she specifically attacked the liberal perspective in IR for not taking Africa seriously. Although Liberal-pluralists depart from realist and neo-Marxist thinking by stressing less on military and economic power domination and more on state preferences in a complex-interdependency environment (Doyle, 1986; Keohane & Nye, 1977).

Nkiwane (Nkiwane, 2001, p. 284) thus avers that, “African examples and perspectives are regarded as primarily of nuisance value”. Even Francis Fukuyama (Fukuyama, 1999, p. 19) as cited by Nkiwane states that, “...and Sub-Saharan Africa has so many problems that its lack of political and economic development seems over determined”. Indeed, on many fronts, African states remain minor powers, still “hemmed in” by the seemingly immovable structures of inequality, by the high levels of poverty and underdevelopment, often fragile economies and weak political and military capacity (Brown, 2012, p. 1889–1890).

Critical to understanding Africa’s marginality in IR is the discourse surrounding the meanings ascribed to the terms “West” and “Africa”. To Matthews and Solomon,<sup>6</sup> this common discourse (with its roots in the West) portrays the West as representative of the rule of law, representative government, capitalist economy and guarantees to certain rights and liberties. The reverse is true for Africa where it is portrayed as an ailing, diseased, weak and sickly patient in need of Western aid (Jaycox, 1992; Morrow, 1992; Spence, 1997; Westlake, 1989). This discourse inevitably reinforced the existing unequal power relations between the West and Africa. The Western approach to African economic and political development problems, stems from, and depicts this power inequality.<sup>7</sup>

This article forwards the argument that African agency in IR continues to be relevant today as it was in the past. The major undoing of IR scholarship has been its unwillingness to highlight, discuss and interrogate African agency chiefly because it has been assumed that African actors are passive and supplicant participators in relations with external interlocutors. However, this submission highlights that African agency is being exerted in even more assertive ways today in multifaceted forms and ways. The African Union (AU), Individual African states, African Civil Society, the private sector as well as eminent and ordinary personalities are all exerting this assertive agency. This article, thus, moves away from the traditional way of looking at political agency as emanating merely from the state but broadens the conception of African political agency to encompass non-state actors as well.

### 3. African agency from the 1970s to the 1990s

The narrative of Africa’s marginality discussed above does not give a comprehensive picture of the continent’s place in IR. One of the scholars who support this view concludes that, “More than ever, the discourse on Africa’s marginality is a nonsense” (Bayart, 2000, p. 267). In this article Bayart argues that Africa has never existed apart from world politics but has unavoidably been entangled in the ebb and flow of events and changing configurations of power.

Hence, it is important to note that African elites have been adept at establishing and manipulating international connections, especially in diplomatic and military alliances, the control of agricultural and oil exports, and imports of all kinds as well as external financing aid, to derive both personal and national rent (Bayart, Ellis, & Hibou, 1999, p. 16). Thus, “the evident weaknesses of African states did not reduce them to a state of inertia in which their fate was determined by external powers. On the contrary, it impelled them to take measures designed to ensure survival, or at least improve their chances of it” (Clapham, 1996, p. 4). Therefore, African agents are far from being structural “idiots” or cultural “dopes” merely reproducing the social order, but they also have significant capabilities (Cohen, 1987, p. 302).

Of particular interest is that before 2000, there has also been a continual flow of both ideas and goods between Africa, Europe, Asia and the Americas. African countries, through the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) as well as through other multilateral fora such as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), also played critical roles in the decolonisation process as well as putting an end to apartheid. African countries have historically responded to their relative weaknesses through embracing Pan Africanism (Shivji, 2006; Zartman, 1967). The establishment of the OAU in 1963, now the AU, was a realisation that African agency can be more effective when combined (Zartman, 1967). In this connection, the Africa group in 1969 guided the United Nations General

Assembly (UNGA) in declaring apartheid a crime against humanity in Resolution 2202a (XXI) (Nkiwane, 2001, p. 285). This demonstrated the effectiveness of the Africa caucus or the Africa group in projecting common African positions in the UN in the 1960s and early 1970s. These common positions were also evident in the conferences of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in the same period (European Centre for Development Policy Management, 2014).

The OAU also provided a guiding framework for the implementation of collective forms of foreign policy among its members regarding particular international events. For instance, following the Israeli occupation of the Sinai during the Arab-Israeli war in 1967, the OAU set up an investigatory committee which found Israel at fault. A resolution was then adopted at the OAU summit in 1973 urging all African states to break relations with Israel for its violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Egypt. This recommendation was subsequently implemented by all but a handful of African states. Greatly assisted by a sense of African solidarity, even reluctant states such as Ethiopia and Liberia had to break ties with Israel in order to retain their credibility within the African setting (Clapham, 1996).

eAfrican leaders, as purposive agents, during the Cold War, also used the East-West divide to carve out political space for their states. Although, most African states espoused a foreign policy of non-alignment, they “aligned” with either the USA or the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) led blocs to extract political and economic gains during the Cold War. This resulted in diplomatic successes for Africa as well as getting access to economic aid necessary for some form of industrial development (Brayton, 1979; Fleck & Kilby, 2008).

Similarly, African liberation movements and their leaders also benefited from Cold War ideological differences particularly after the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s by accessing training, financial and weaponry support from either China or the USSR. This was mostly evidenced in Zimbabwe where the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) led by Robert Mugabe and the Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU) led by Joshua Nkomo got their support from China and the USSR, respectively (Brayton, 1979). By taking advantage of the international division that existed, Africa utilised the agency of the weak to benefit itself. Thus, the display of initiative by African leaders and leaders of African non-state organisations reflected African agency during that era, although literature covering this subject does not specifically refer to it as such (Brayton, 1979; Scalapino, 1964).

In the 1980s and 1990s, African rulers were also seen to be adept at manipulating their external relations so as to maximise their freedom of action and protect their domestic base, even when operating in conditions of extreme weakness. A few African states remained immune to the demands of structural adjustment through the early 1980s, although they ultimately capitulated by the end of the decade.<sup>8</sup> For example, for some time, Tanzania managed to resist structural adjustment because it continued to be able to tap non-conditional aid. The same applied to Nigeria because it was sustained by oil revenues. In the case of Uganda, the Museveni regime was able to use external approval of their economic policies to protect themselves against demands for political change (Clapham, 2005). Furthermore, the strategic and eloquent diplomacy of Rwanda’s post-genocide leaders to get international aid for state development is a reflection of African agency (Lyons, 2014). Thus, “while this is probably what it should be, it seems to have come as quite a surprise to some other international actors, that Africans could be the masters of their own destiny” (Lyons, 2014, p. 123).

It is hence an error to marginalise Africa on the assumption that the continent lacks meaningful politics (Gourevitch, 1998). African political actors can be considered rational and conscious and not driven by external pressures. Elites are seen to have played an active, rather than a dependent role in the accumulation of foreign aid and loans (Chabal & Daloz, 1999). In other words, it does not help our appreciation of African Politics to describe the continent as retarded, dysfunctional or inoperative, as

is rife in Afro-pessimist media reportage (Dorman, 2001). In fact, “contra to the notion that Africa is a passive bystander in global processes, African elites have proven themselves excellent arch-manipulators of the international system” (Taylor, 2010, p. 6).

African individuals and policymakers also continue to construct innovative responses to meet their political, economic and social needs. For example, Africa exists in the privileged centre of global discourses on the environment, migration flows, biodiversity, human security, land mines, women’s rights, development, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), IFS as well as Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs). Africa may be marginal to legitimate trade, but it is central to illegal trade in drugs, arms and ivory (Dunn, 2001). Deconstructing IR theory reveals that Africa holds a critical, if not problematic position there as well. The continent is the necessary catalyst that makes the dominant IR theories complete. For post-colonialists, Africa is the *Other* necessary for the construction of a mythical Western *Self*. As a product of modernity, Western IR theory therefore rests on the necessary marginalisation of Africa and other non-Western sites of knowledge (Dunn, 2001).

#### 4. Diplomatic activity since 2000: soft balancing

Africa’s lack of considerable military/hard power implies that its foreign policy options are at best limited. Hence, the use of non-military tools such as international institutions, economic statecraft and other diplomatic arrangements (Pape, 2005). To Flesmes (2009), soft balancing involves institutional strategies such as the formation of limited diplomatic coalitions or ententes, to constrain the power of the USA and other established great powers. This institutional strategy is also referred to as “buffering”, and aims to extend the room for manoeuvre by weaker states vis-à-vis stronger states. It also involves strengthening economic ties between emerging powers through sector-related collaboration. This could possibly shift the balance of economic power in the medium-term (Flesmes, 2009). African resistance, especially to the US policies has been evident since the beginning of the twenty-first century. This resistance by African countries has been evident in several areas. According to Whitaker (Whitaker, 2010, p. 1112):

In 2003, as the Bush administration built a coalition to remove Saddam Hussein, several African leaders were among the voices of dissent. Former South African President Nelson Mandela condemned the US for ignoring international opinion and pursuing reckless unilateral action. Bolstered by massive anti-war protests in his country, the South African President Thabo Mbeki was an especially vocal critic and, along with his counterparts in Nigeria and Senegal, sent a harsh letter to the White House.

To Blaauw (Blaauw, 2014, p. 10), “the contention here is that soft balancing as a theory serves as a powerful theoretical construct to explain the behaviour of weak African states towards the United States, the European Union (EU) and their attitude to world trade negotiations. Deliberate policy choices and not position in the structure of the international society determines the behaviour of states”. This partly explains why in recent years, several African countries that have historically been friendly towards the USA have taken a stand in opposition to American policies. It is not surprising that the leaders of Sudan and Zimbabwe have continued to resist US pressures (Whitaker, 2010).

Soft balancing has also been evident in African countries’ opposition to the establishment of a permanent US military presence in Africa through the US Africa Command (AFRICOM).<sup>9</sup> Thus, soft balancing has become an important option for African countries who cannot afford the military and economic resources associated with hard balancing.

In international diplomacy, the tendency of African states to stand united in the face of international criticism of one of their number is not only reflective of soft balancing but collective agency as well. In fact, the term “agent” can also be applied in the same sense to collectivities that act as corporate units (political parties, trade unions and states) in the same manner it is used in connection with individual agents (people) (Hindess, 1986). A look at the AU’s unwillingness to

publicly criticise Robert Mugabe's human rights abuses and their recent refusal to honour commitments to the International Criminal Court (ICC) by refusing to cooperate in the arrest of the Sudanese President Omar Al Bashir is also a demonstration of this form of agency at work (Smith, 2012; Zartman, 2008). This collective agency has also been described as the "diplomacy of solidarity" whereby fellow African leaders stand by and defend their colleagues on whom economic and political sanctions would have been imposed by the West.<sup>10</sup>

The failure of sanctions to change the behaviour of Nigeria and Libya, as well as that of Zimbabwe, is reflective of this agency often encapsulated in issues of brotherhood and *ubuntu*.<sup>11</sup> Thus, African states' behaviour is governed by a collectivist worldview in which states are not independent entities, but are rather members of "a group animated by a spirit of solidarity" (Okere, 1984, p. 48). In such societies, group preferences are preferred to personal interests, and individuals are deemed as interdependent, and their self is taken as inextricably linked with the selves of others (Tieku, 2012).

Furthermore, the feeling of "we-ness", or public show of support among African leaders goes beyond the merely rhetorical level and imposes upon African leaders a sense that at any rate they ought to act in harmony (Clapham, 1996; Tieku, 2009). The solidarity norm not only discourages African leaders from disagreeing with each other in public but "it also puts pressure on the rulers of individual African states not to step out of line over issues where a broad continental consensus had been established" (Clapham, 1996, p. 106–107). This consensus making norm was established in the African inter-state system at the first session of the OAU Council of Ministers held in Lagos in 1963 (Thompson & Zartman, 1975). Since then, it has become an important element in African diplomatic practise.

In practise consensus and solidarity have shaped the AU in four ways. First, any action taken by the AU should not undermine the harmony (at least in public) that exists among African governments, second, major decision-making must be based on group thought and consensus, and third, the AU forum must not be used by any African government against another and fourth, any public criticism of an African leader by a non-African entity should not be tolerated by the AU (Tieku, 2009). The cases of Sudan and Zimbabwe referred to above serve as a classic example of these principles, and by extension, of a form of African agency at work.

The AU's common position on the reform of the United Nations (UN), in which African countries are seeking permanent representation on the UN Security Council, commonly known as the Ezulwini consensus is a further reflection of African agency.<sup>12</sup> Arguably, although problems of capacity still persist, the AU has also been assertive in issues of continental peace and security.<sup>13</sup> For example, the relative peace that exists in Somalia is largely credited to efforts of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and the regional body has also improved its troop deployment capacity as exemplified by the presence of AU troops in Central African Republic (CAR) as well as in Mali. However, negotiations for partnership with the UN in these conflict zones are a reflection of the AU's inability to sustain these peace-keeping missions on its own (United Nations Press Release, 29 September 2014).<sup>14</sup> For Brown (2012, p. 1896) the AU's actions in response to the Libya crisis in 2011-criticising the UN-sanctioned North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) intervention, launching its own high-level diplomatic mission to broker a ceasefire and initial non-recognition of the new regime was notable for the extent to which it stood out from the route pursued by the dominant powers (outright use of force).

The political space for this initiative relied largely on the prior ground work done in founding the AU as a collective voice of the continent, building the regional organisation and creating a series of principles regarding intervention and non-recognition of regimes that come to power through the use of force. The agency exercised was therefore around the precise ways in which the role of mediator, defined as an "African" role, was taken forward by the Zuma-led delegation. Nevertheless, the extent to which the room for manoeuvre opened up, its use, and the results of the exercise were shaped by wider political constraints (Brown, 2012; Chipaike, 2012; Ekwealor, 2013).

It is also important to note that with attempts to create a fair trading system at the World Trade Organisation (WTO), African agency has been shown to be effective. The neo-liberal global economic system within which negotiations for the liberalisation of markets under the WTO has come with a chance for all concerned countries to be at the negotiating table. African countries have become more assertive in global negotiations and have utilised justice and fairness rhetoric to exert blocking power<sup>15</sup> (Chatham House, 2011; Cornellisen, 2009; Harman & Brown, 2013; p. 69–87; Lee, 2012; Payne, 2010; Vickers, 2013).<sup>16</sup>

In the same vein, Africa's civil society agency has also been demonstrated through a coalition of African NGOs that joined the international NGOs in a campaign against the WTO' 1999 Seattle Ministerial Conference through launching a series of protests and campaigns with the rallying theme, "WTO-Shrink or Sink! The Turn Around Agenda". Ghana's NGOs issued a press statement as:

"We of African civil society call our governments in Africa and other Third World countries to reject the new issues being proposed so that our national sovereignty and development options can be protected, and to demand a review and reform of the WTO rules and system. We also call on all civil society organisations to reinforce their struggles on these issues (Oh, n.d)."

This above scenario set a precedence which characterised subsequent WTO Ministerial conferences succeeding the Seattle Ministerial Conference of 1999. A key challenge lies in turning Africa's blocking power into influence at the negotiation table.

It is worth to consider the agency exerted by the African governments and 77-plus ACP member states in resisting a speedy transition from interim Economic Partnership Agreements (iEPAs) to comprehensive EPAs with the EU citing a number of concerns including the plight of infant industries, EU' Common Agriculture Policy (CAP), government procurement, competition policy among many. In the same logic the concerted effort played by the civil society in the "STOP EPA" campaigns vindicate the active role of African agency in bilateral agreements. Civil society acted as the "watchdog" in the process. It did a lot of relevant research for African countries so that they did not sign agreements harmful to African economies (Matarutse, 2014, p. 60). Civil society provided background papers for the negotiations and these were well grounded. Kwa et al. (Kwa, Lunenburg, & Musonge, 2014:55) argue that, 'The East and Southern Africa Small Scale Farmers (ESAFF) has urged the EU to find alternatives to the EPA "as part of the current process and as provided for in the Cotonou Agreement"'. African agency in the case of East and Southern Africa (ESA), EPA group managed to drag the EPA negotiations (form 2000) for more than a decade through resisting the EU's unfavorable concessions.

Indeed, all the major powers in the world have since 2000 begun to attach greater importance to the continent as evidenced by the growing cooperation between themselves and Africa.<sup>17</sup> This is a distinctive sign of Africa's growing importance in IR (Lingying, 2013 online). Further, joint United Nations and AU efforts have brought relative stability in the continent, reducing armed conflict considerably (Bosco, 2008, p. 58–59).<sup>18</sup> This has created an enabling environment for investment and general economic development. This increasingly attractive environment has become a theatre of great-power and emerging countries' competition for access to African natural endowments as well as a relatively untapped market. This offers Africa a favourable position to enhance its international status and thus increase its agency. African states can leverage on their natural resources to get favourable credit lines, as well as invoking international agreements that govern aid relationships in their interactions with donor countries and international financiers. These agreements, which include the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, the Busan Declaration as well as the Accra agenda for Action and all stress the importance of ownership of donor programmes by recipient countries, thus enhancing their agency.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, those African states that are important in the global fight against terrorism and counter piracy operations can exert their agency in ways that can "force" their "visitors" to capacitate local armies and law enforcement agencies to effectively execute their duties.<sup>20</sup>

Accompanying and influencing the visibility of African agency is the on-going emergence of a “multi-polar” world<sup>21</sup> which has “democratised” and liberalised IR leading to the opening of spaces for manoeuvre for Africa (Lingying, 2013 online). Indeed, world affairs are no longer dominated by the USA and Europe alone as the emergence of China and other BRIC countries as well as Turkey and South Korea has shown and this has positive implications for agency since African countries have considerably more leeway to choose partners. As a result, a number of African countries are showing growing signs of assertiveness in their negotiation for development assistance as they leverage on their natural resources.

### 5. Actors and scenarios in african agency

Agency enacted by African state and non-state actors can best be described as “multi-faceted agency”. It consists of multiple actors operating at different levels; that of the AU level as the regional intergovernmental organisation, the level of sub-regional intergovernmental bodies; the level of national states; the agency of state based actors acting on behalf of national states—particularly state leaders and their representatives and non-state actors (Brown, 2012).<sup>22</sup> Indeed, from the beginning of the twenty-first century, a number of African elites, representing their states have been able to exert assertive agency in their international engagements. For example, Angolan officials have to a significant extent been able to effectively negotiate infrastructure-for-oil deals with China while disallowing the Chinese too much room to influence the relationship. China’s need for oil resources has not only aided Angola’s infrastructural development but has also showed the potential of Angolan elites’ negotiating capacities. For example, when Angola and the Chinese EXIM Bank agreed on an additional \$2 billion loan facility for about 100 projects, the Angolan government managed to “force” their Chinese counterparts to relax conditions of Chinese exports in the project. They also managed to negotiate downwards the interest rate for the repayment of the loan to London Interbank Offer Rate (Libor) plus 1.25% as well as increasing the repayment period to 15 years (Campos & Vines, 2008). A number of examples can be cited on how the Angolan regime has exerted agency in its relationship with China using oil as leverage and this speaks to the view that agency is not only found in knowing the material resources that you have but in knowing the value attached by the other party to resources that you have. However, Angola’s management of the totality of its relationship with China and other partners could be improved by working with civil society. The major limiting factor to the exertion of a multi-faceted form of agency by Angola is the authoritarian governance system in place in the country. In this system, civil society is viewed with suspicion—as agents of regime change. However, civil society organisations can be effective partners for African governments in negotiating various deals with external partners for the benefit of African citizens.

In contrast to Angola, Ghana, with its democratic political system has been able to exert a multi-faceted form of agency in its relationship with the Chinese owing to the fact that civil society has been allowed to play an important role. In fact, owing to Ghana’s initial exploitation of oil from 2010 as well as its cocoa production, Ghana negotiated the installation of various infrastructure projects including the Bui dam. The dam was built by a cocoa backed loan facility from the China EXIM Bank (Hensengerth, 2011). The construction was carried out by the Chinese company, Sino-hydro. Even after agreeing with the Chinese EXIM Bank, the Ghanaian government produced two important documents containing norms, standards and procedures with which Sino-hydro had to comply in the execution of the project. These are the 2006 feasibility study by French consulting firm Coyne et Bellier and the 2007 Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) by UK based consulting firm Environmental Resources Management (Hensengerth, 2011, p. 11). The Ghanaian government thus managed to direct Sino-hydro to abide by standards and procedures that are normally associated with DAC and World Bank funded projects to ensure that environmental norms and human rights were not excessively affected by the project. Ghana’s democracy has opened room for non-state actors to exert agency in the country’s interactions with China. For example, while Chinese corporations in general do not allow trade union activity, in Ghana, they have been forced to abide by local laws and regulations to allow workers to exercise their rights in this way. In the Bui Dam project, Sino hydro had initially disallowed workers to engage in labour

union activity. However, a deputation from Ghana's Trade Union Council (TUC) argued that this fundamental labour right was enshrined both in Ghanaian law and in the contract. This interplay of elite and non-state agency in effectively laying out procedures and ensuring that they are followed is a reflection of Ghana's assertive agency in an environment in which "local laws are well elaborated and more importantly enforced" (Mohan, 2010, p. 4). Thus, democratic African states are presented with more opportunities for the exertion of a multi-faceted and effective form of agency compared to authoritarian ones.

Another example of state-civil society cooperation is found in Gabon. Gabonese civil society organisations forced a halt to Sinopec's oil exploration activities in the country in 2006. Indeed, having been awarded the Lotus exploration block in the Loango National Park, the Chinese oil company started its seismic exploration activities based on a poor Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) by a Dutch company. This led to an international outcry led by Gabonese NGOs, supported by international NGOs from Western countries resulting in the stopping of exploration and subsequent redoing of the EIA by the Dutch company which had previously done it together with Enviro-Pass (a Gabonese organisation) and the World Wide Fund (Jiang, 2009).

Eminent African personalities such as Nelson Mandela, Mo Ibrahim, among others have also played critical roles in the advancement of African agency. For example, in 2005, Nelson Mandela, the first black president of post-apartheid South Africa delivered a powerful speech in a campaign against global poverty in London's Trafalgar Square. In another speech delivered at the G8 summit in 2005, Mandela stated that:

"Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings. And overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life. While poverty persists, there is no true freedom".<sup>23</sup>

The former South African President also mobilised global youth in his campaigns against poverty, HIV/AIDS and related ills.<sup>24</sup> Mandela's strong stance against HIV/AIDS set him apart from his successors, that is, Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma who have been respectively criticised for being too lax and denialist in their fight against the scourge.<sup>25</sup> Another eminent African personality, Mo Ibrahim has been playing an important role in encouraging good governance in Africa through his foundation. In 2006 Mo Ibrahim launched a foundation to tackle this crucial challenge of governance and leadership in Africa; safety and rule of law; participation and human rights; sustainable economic opportunity and human development (*The Guardian*, October, 4, 2010). His foundation was established to put governance at the centre of any conversation on African development, believing that governance and leadership lie at the heart of any tangible improvement in the quality of life of African people. In an effort to improve governance in Africa, the foundation has got the Ibrahim index of governance which rates African countries' governance performance annually.<sup>26</sup> Such eminent African persons also include women who have played fundamental roles in peace-building in different regions of the continent such as West Africa (mainly in Liberia and Sierra Leone) and East Africa (especially Kenya).<sup>27</sup> Liberian woman, Leymah Gbowee received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 for leading a women's peace movement that brought an end to the Second Liberian Civil War in 2003. In Kenya, Wangari Maathai, the late Kenyan environmental and political activist also played an important international role in the area of international environmental protection and human rights. In 2004, she won the Nobel Peace Prize for her international environmental conservation efforts and human rights campaigns in Kenya.<sup>28</sup> Such individuals need to be mentioned in discussions of African agency.

Even at the level of people-to-people interactions in Africa, ordinary African people continue to show agency in their relations with foreigners (Chinese).<sup>29</sup> Indeed, African actors within and beyond the state level are able to exert agency power in order to advance individual interests (Mohan & Power, 2013). For example, Chinese citizens in Ghana must cultivate cordial relations

with their hosts to ensure their own prosperity and legal stay in the country. This can, in most instances, be ensured by the payment of illegal tips to government officials, “agents” and influential people who either act as gatekeepers, linkman or “protection” providers.

This state of affairs contrasts with the general narrative forwarded by some scholars showing the Chinese on the African continent as strong, monolithic actors who are equal to the Chinese state, whereas Africans are undifferentiated victims who are powerless in their encounters with the Chinese (Lam, 2015, p. 10).

Additionally, African workers, traders, students and travellers in China have shown strong organisational and advocacy ability even when faced with considerable structural odds (Bischoff, 2015). For example, African students associations that have been formed for different reasons are not “lawful” in China, but research recently done in China provides evidence that African students have exerted considerable agency in establishing associations contrary to the prevailing “law” (Bischoff, 2015, p. 11–12). Besides “circumventing” local laws in the manner referred above, students and other ordinary African individuals’ associations are rarely supported by African diplomatic representatives to Beijing. Thus, Africans in China, without direct assistance from their own embassies find themselves asserting their own agency and sovereignty within the borders of a powerful country (Bischoff, 2015).

## 6. Conclusion

This article has highlighted the loopholes in the traditional politics thinking that paints African states as objects rather than active subjects of IRs. Indeed, both traditional IR theory in the form of realism and liberalism as well as potent scholars such as Hans Morgenthau, Francis Fukuyama, among others did not take Africa seriously as a subject of IR. This is despite the fact that African states have since the independence exerted agency and showed initiative in their external engagements. Indeed, state elites have played critical roles in the extractive industries’ value chain, managed to get strategic benefits from aligning with either side of the Cold War belligerents as well as playing crucial roles in the decolonisation of the continent as well as fighting apartheid.

African states have also been adept at soft-balancing against established powers such as the USA, EU and to some extent China. By utilising the soft-balancing strategy, African states have been able to adopt deliberate policy positions that have acted as a buffer against bullying by bigger powers. Thus, ability to exert agency does not entirely depend on a state’s position in the international political and economic structures.

African states’ tendency to protect one of their number when under “unfair attack” from external actors is significant for the analysis of African agency. Indeed, such combined agency or the diplomacy of solidarity has defined African states’ attitude towards the ICC which issued Sudanese president Omar Al Bashir with an arrest warrant in 2010. African states have protected him since then.

Critical to note as well is the fact that African agency should not be entirely viewed as solely emanating from state elites. There is need to integrate African non-state actors in the form of civil society and individuals if the total picture of African agency is to emerge. Indeed, those states that work closely with independent non-state actors are able to exert a more assertive form of agency in their external engagements compared to the more exclusivist or authoritarian ones.

In the final analysis, African actors are not passive agents in IR. They have been able to exert various levels of agency over the years and can improve their capabilities if there is a combination of both state and non-state efforts in engaging external partners. The overall result is a multi-faceted or multi-actor type of agency that is more effective.

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### Notes

1. The term Africa shall predominantly refer to countries south of the Sahara, although references will also be made to North African countries where applicable.
2. The conception of agency guiding this paper is based on the definition by Chabal (Chabal & Daloz, 1999: 7) that agency is, “directed, meaningful, intentional and self-reflective social action”.
3. The first victim of this process was Ghana in 1982. See A. Yakubu (2005). *Why Ghana Opted for SAP*. Retrieved 26 May 2015 from <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=93436>.
4. See <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/jul/09/population.aids>.
5. Tony Blair’s speech, Retrieved 12 November 2015 from <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2001/oct/02/labourconference.labour6>.
6. Mathews and Solomon’s discussion retrieved 2 October 2015 from <http://www.cips.up.ac.za/files/pdf/uafspublications/Necessity%2520of%2520challenge%2520to%2520western%2520discourses.pdf>.
7. Tony Blair’s norm driven and moralist African foreign policy, the “big push” donor theory for more aid to Africa as well as SAPs all sum up this approach.
8. The Kenyan government also resisted the large-scale public sector redundancies during the SAP era because of the attendant adverse social consequences (Richardson, 1996). However, much of the resistance to SAPs came from social movements such as Trade Unions and College students’ groups among others as well as Non-Governmental Organisations since state elites quickly capitulated in the face of demands from the International Monetary Fund.
9. See Article by Bill Weinberg, “African leaders, Civil Society reject Pentagon’s Africa Command”. Retrieved 20 July 2015 from <http://ww4report.com/node/5160>. But it should be noted that the USA already has a military base in Africa, in Djibouti specifically.
10. This type of African “agency” has made relations between the AU and the West, particularly with the European Union, complicated. Thus to the EU, the AU is often weak and is sometimes an instrument for isolated leaders such as Mugabe and Al Bashir. It is also suffering from poor decision making chains and a weak bureaucracy. In that state, it is difficult to establish a functioning relationship between the two parties, because on the one hand, the AU wants power and autonomy, while on the other the EU needs AU accountability, especially taking into cognisance the funding role of the EU to the African Union (Barrios, 2010). These problems may also explain why instead of dealing with the AU in the ACP partnership, Europe chooses to deal with sub-regional organisations.
11. A collectivist approach to social life in which the group is more important than the individual, and actions of members are interpreted in the context of group solidarity. It is summarised in the statement that “a person is a person through others”.
12. Ezulwini Consensus of 2005, puts forward the common position of the African Union (AU) on the reform of the United Nations in general and the Security Council in particular. For the AU, full representation in the UN means; (i) not less than two permanent members with all the prerogatives and privileges of permanent membership and the right to veto in the Security Council, and (ii) five non-permanent seats in the Security Council. Although this position has not yet materialised, it is a projection of African agency owing to the African group’s significant numbers at the UN. Information retrieved 23 March 2015 from <http://www.cfr.org/world/common-african-position-proposed-reform-united-nations-ezulwini-consensus/p25444>.
13. The African Union’s pre occupation with security today may be a consequence of the neglect of Africa by the international community in the 1990s. This is also the period when Africa was viewed as a hopeless continent (Africa, 2000b) as well as a region unable to make meaningful politics (Gourevitch, 1998). Thus conflicts were allowed to fester, with most African states lacking the capacity to stop them and the international community seemingly disinterested to engage with the problematic issues of the continent in a constructive way.
14. It remains clear that major International Organisations involved in peacekeeping in Africa are challenged by institutional resource limitations and are often plagued by overstretch, as the number of peacekeeping operations and troops deployed has drastically increased. The need for cooperation is thus driven by normative standards for peacekeeping but also by a lack of capacity in major peacekeeping actors (Brosig, 2010). For example, the AU intervened in Burundi in 2003 and the UN took over the mission a year later. Further, in the Central African Republic and Chad, the EU and the UN simultaneously set up peace operations in 2007 as a reaction to the Darfur crisis. As of April 2010, there was only one integrated peacekeeping mission underway, the so-called AU/UN Hybrid Mission to Darfur (Brosig, 2010). These multi-actor peace keeping missions provide room for shared agency in peace-keeping initiatives in Africa. These deployments of African and international forces in African conflict hotspots gives credence to the emergence of an African security architecture with the establishment of the AU in 2002 and its proactive position towards peacekeeping (Brosig, 2010).
15. African leaders in the continent and those leading countries with people of African descent in the Caribbean have continuously used the moral argument against erstwhile Western enslavers and colonisers to get reparations for past wrongs. For example, “in 1992, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) formed and mandated a Group of Eminent Persons (GEP) to explore a proposal by the Jamaica-based human rights lawyer Lord Anthony Gifford for a representative body with a mandate to claim reparations on behalf of all Africans who continued to suffer the consequences of the crime

- of mass kidnap and enslavement” (Jones, 2014). Retrieved 12 May 2015 from <http://discoversociety.org/2014/05/06/focus-righting-historical-wrongs-the-case-for-reparations/>.
16. It is also important to note that the Africa group in the UN General Assembly has a considerable weight of votes, which makes the region symbolically powerful when different issues are decided upon at the UN. However, critical matters of international peace and security are still decided upon by the permanent five members of the Security Council, a body which has no permanent African representation.
  17. For example, in 2000, the then USA president Bill Clinton approved the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) which provided eligible African countries with more than 6000 products lines for duty free export to the USA. In the same year, the first European Union (EU)-Africa Summit was held. This year also marked the signing of the Cotonou Partnership Agreement on the Establishment of Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) between the EU and the African Caribbean, Pacific group, and this would allow African countries to access the EU market duty and quota free. China through the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation launched in 2000 has also provided development assistance and investment to a host of African countries as a result of the abundant natural resources in Africa. Japan, India and Brazil have also engaged Africa at various levels and strengthened their bilateral relations in the process.
  18. However, to Nick Grono of the International Crisis Group, while there has been a big fall in the number of state based in Africa over the past 15 years—a reduction by half-Africa is still home to most of the world’s intra-state conflicts. Citing a Human Security Report by Andy Mack of the Human Security Centre in Canada in 2005, 46 of 89 cases of armed conflict and one-sided violence were in Africa. Retrieved 16 December 2015 from [http://eeas.europa.eu/ifs/publications/articles/book2/book%20vol2\\_part4\\_chapter57\\_early%20warning%20and%20the%20responsibility%20to%20prevent%20conflicts\\_nick%20grono.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/ifs/publications/articles/book2/book%20vol2_part4_chapter57_early%20warning%20and%20the%20responsibility%20to%20prevent%20conflicts_nick%20grono.pdf).
  19. The New Partnership for Africa’s Development also emphasises this aspect.
  20. Programmes such as the Africa Contingency Operations Training and Assistance (ACOTA) which is funded by the US Department of State can analysed from this perspective. The ACOTA’s main function is to capacitate African militaries by providing selected training and equipment necessary for multinational peace support operations. Since 1997, the U.S. has provided training and non-lethal equipment to more than 215 000 peacekeepers from African partner militaries in 238 contingent units. Retrieved 23 September 2015 from <http://www.africom.mil/what-we-do/security-cooperation-programs/acota-africa-contingency-operations-training-and-assistance>.
  21. Dickinson (2009 online), writing in *Foreign Policy* asserted that, “the multipolar world has become a global reality, recognised as a near certainty by no less than an authority than the US intelligence community”. Retrieved August, 8, 2015 from <http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/10/15/new-order/>. Further, pointing to the strengthening of economic and political ties between China, India and Russia, Zanitti (2015 online) believes that a multi polar world is evolving in which the USA’s global influence monopoly on politics and economics is increasingly being challenged. Retrieved 23 September 2015 from [http://english.pravda.ru/world/asia/15-01-2015/129526-russia\\_china\\_india-0/](http://english.pravda.ru/world/asia/15-01-2015/129526-russia_china_india-0/) y.
  22. In addition, although it is problematic to make reference to African agency in the singular, it is possible to do so on the basis of the fact that Africa is taken as a collective international actor as well as a collection of states (Brown, 2012: 1891). The African Union, as the continental body should be allowed by African states to play a central role in the region’s interaction with the outside world, and particularly with China. At the moment, most China-Africa interactions (even with the FOCAC framework) are bilateral and the African Union and its constituent bodies play a peripheral role (Taylor, 2010: 32). African states need to surrender part of their sovereignty to the regional body and allow it to shape a common vision for the continent. Such a vision can be used as the framework for continental integration through multilaterally negotiated infrastructure programmes aimed at total continental integration. At the moment, the bilateral arrangements that exist give a picture of states competing against each other for Chinese development aid, and this scenario has negative implications for African agency. In fact, “African states engaging primarily in bilateral relations with powers outside the continent have, apart from the summitry associated with the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), the United Nations and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) of the past, had only had a limited interest in the development of the continent’s own multilateralism” (Bischoff, 2008: 178). History has however shown that African agency has been successful when combined, hence the need to strengthen the African Union (Zartman, 1967: 1). Additionally, African non-state actors should be given a prominent role to play in African Union (AU) structures and activities in order to expand the scope of the participation of individuals. This democratisation of the AU can bring greater legitimacy to the organisation and allow it to harness the creativity and innovation of the continent’s non-state actors in a manner that allows the exertion of more African agency.
  23. Information on Mandela’s anti-poverty campaign be retrieved from 23 June 2015 from <http://m.christianpost.com/news/nelson-mandelas-fight-against-poverty-remembered-after-south-african-leaders-passing-110266/>.
  24. Some of his sentiments during these gatherings can be retrieved 23 June 2015 from [http://db.nelsonmandela.org/speeches/pub\\_view.asp?pg=item&ItemID=NMS1050&txtstr=economic%20growth](http://db.nelsonmandela.org/speeches/pub_view.asp?pg=item&ItemID=NMS1050&txtstr=economic%20growth).
  25. More information retrieved 23 June 2015 from <http://theconversation.com/mandelas-stance-on-hiv-set-him-apart-from-his-anc-successors-21264>.
  26. Refer to note 47.
  27. The case of women peace builders in Wajir District in Kenya is a good example of how ordinary people can play critical roles in the advancement of peace in Africa. See report by Monica Kathina Juma. Retrieved 14 July 2015 from <http://lnweb90.worldbank.org/CAW/CAWDoclib.nsf/0/>

2662DA99837757A085256CC50070864A/\$file/unveiling+women.pdf.

28. More information on Wangari Maathai retrieved 14 July 2015 from <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/27/world/africa/wangari-maathai-nobel-peace-prize-laureate-dies-at-71.html>.
29. The type of people-to-people relations between China and Africa is different from the people-to-people relations that exist between Africa and the West. On one hand, the people-to-people interactions between Chinese and Africans is mainly expressed in African small business persons shopping in China and students on Chinese funded scholarships, as well as Chinese small business persons residing and working in Africa. On the other hand, the people-to-people relations between Westerners and Africans are expressed in the large numbers of footballers plying their trade in European Clubs, African musicians in the USA and to an extent Westerners doing business in Africa. In all these interactions, Africans have been shown to be capable and powerful agents.
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